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By [Felice D. Gaer](#) and [Nina Shea](#)

Commissioners on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

While Americans routinely enjoy religious freedom, most people live in places where it is seriously restricted.

In 1998, Congress passed, and the President signed into law, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), committing America to support this universal human right abroad. As Congress attends to the issue of the reauthorization of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which IRFA created and on which we've served, it's time to address some myths about backing religious freedom overseas:

- Myth: Promoting religious freedom supports a minor, narrow right to practice religious rites.

From food to clothing, work to play, births to funerals, weddings to holy days, worship to prayer, and almsgiving to thanksgiving, religion or belief is an integral part of identity and daily living for billions of people.

Religious freedom -- which encompasses freedom of thought and conscience - is foundational for a broad constellation of rights. Inseparable from freedom of expression and association, it's often the first freedom threatened by tyranny and terror. Freedom of religion or belief matters not only for religious adherents, but for those embracing no religion or beliefs rejecting all religions.

That's why IRFA, through USCIRF and the Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. State Department, supports the right to reject as well as accept any religion or belief system.

- Myth: Promoting religious freedom imposes America's values on others.

America's concern for religious freedom is rooted in the first clause of our First Amendment. Yet IRFA's statutory mandate is tied to universal values. In 1948, the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Its Article 18 states that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his [her] religion or belief, alone or in community with others, and, in public or private, to manifest his [her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Based on our overseas travels, we can attest that every religious minority wants the full measure of religious freedom which these standards uphold -- standards we use to hold their countries to account.

- Myth: Promoting religious freedom abroad means favoring some religions over others.

Our government has spotlighted religious freedom abuse victims no matter the community to which they belong. Muslims have suffered terribly under non-Muslim governments in countries like Russia and Burma and under Muslim governments in nations like Saudi Arabia, which targets Shi'a Muslims and other dissenters from its own interpretation of Islam. From Egypt and Iraq to China and Sudan, Christians have endured brutal assaults. In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims alike suffer from violence perpetrated by members of both communities. Our Commission also reports on the mistreatment of Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Buddhists in Vietnam and China, Baha'is in Iran and Egypt, and Ahmadiyahs in Indonesia and Pakistan, and on the promotion of anti-Semitic bigotry in Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Turkey.

- Myth: Promoting religious freedom is too narrow a priority for American foreign policy.

Some believe religious freedom must take a back seat to economic and security issues. Yet universal and humanitarian concerns like protecting human rights, including religious freedom, powerfully affect our relations with the world. As Secretary of State Clinton has stated, they define “who we are.” As President Obama stressed in his Arab Spring speech in May, they constitute a core principle for which we must speak out.

Moreover, religious freedom is associated with vibrant democracy, rising socio-economic well-being, diminished religious and communal tension and violence, and greater stability. Nations that trample on this freedom offer fertile ground for poverty and instability, war and terror. Counterterrorism officials connect terrorism to the dissemination by nations like Saudi Arabia of education that promotes religious intolerance and hate.

- Myth: Promoting religious freedom abroad is a partisan political matter.

In fact, religious freedom is and has been a bipartisan concern. America's history is rich with support from leaders of both parties for religious freedom for mistreated groups, from Jews and Pentecostal Christians in the old Soviet Union to Muslims in Bosnia and refugees from Iraq. Most Americans, regardless of political affiliation, see religious freedom as an unalienable human right. It can't be taken away. And it must be defended by all.

In 1998, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was passed by a Republican Congress and signed by a Democratic president. IRFA established USCIRF as a bipartisan

federal commission, with its commissioners appointed both by Democrats and Republicans in Congress, as well as by the President.

Make no mistake: Freedom of religion or belief is everyone's concern. It's America's business - and the world's.

Gaer and Shea are Commissioners on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov
This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it , or (202) 523-3257.